



Access and Equity for all Students: Students with Disabilities

by Karen Humphrey and Mallory Angeli

Access and equity for all students in higher education continues to be a high priority for the California Postsecondary Education Commission. Recent work in this area has focused on students with disabilities as well as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students. The Commission formed an Access and Equity for All Students Advisory Committee in spring 2008 to discuss challenges faced by these students, the data available, and recommendations to expand opportunities and improve outcomes.

At the Commission's December 2008 meeting, a panel of advocates and students discussed issues faced by LGBT students. A panel on students with disabilities has been convened for the March 2009 Commission meeting. At the June 2009 meeting, Commission staff and the advisory committee will offer policy recommendations on improving access and equity in higher education for both groups of students.

Data on Students with Disabilities

A September 2008 CPEC report, *Students with Disabilities and LGBT Students*, provided an overview of potential difficulties facing students with disabilities. The report described the data available to better understand the needs of these students and the services available to them.

The Commission currently collects unitary enrollment and completion data from the University of California, California State University, and the California Community Colleges. The data are available for students who report disabilities, but self-reporting can limit the data available. Students who do not report disabilities are not identified in the data. Beginning in fall 2009, UC and CSU will expand the categories of disabilities to include "invisible" disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, and acquired or traumatic brain injury, as students with these disabilities are being seen in increasing numbers. Use of this data may allow more students to access needed services.

There are no state or federal requirements for independent colleges and universities to report disability data. The Commission does not maintain data on their students with disabilities. The Commission will continue to collect unitary enrollment and completion data from the public systems and update this data to include the systems' expanded disability categories.

Categories of disability in the Commission's data system

Existing categories

- Psychological impairment
- Developmentally delayed
- Mobility impaired
- Multiple disabilities
- Acquired brain injury
- Learning disabled
- Speech/language impaired
- Hearing impaired
- Visually impaired
- Other physical impairment

Expanded categories

- Autism/Asperger's Syndrome
- Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
- Acquired or traumatic brain injury

Research on persistence and graduation rates at UC and CSU shows that students who self-identify as having a disability or who seek disability services have similar cumulative GPAs, persistence rates, and graduation rates as students without identified disabilities. Research does not show whether there are statistically significant differences in the outcomes experienced by students across the range of standard disability categories. Staff will analyze data disaggregated by type of disability. This will allow staff to explore how students access services based on their type of disability, and understand how students with disabilities receive the necessary accommodations needed to help them be successful.

CSU's Center for Accessible Media

An access issue that students face is the availability of textbooks and instructional materials in an alternative format. Assembly Bill 422 (1999) requires publishers to provide campuses an electronic copy of course materials at no additional cost. However, requests from campuses to publishers may go unfilled or the materials may reach the student too late. In an effort to address the need for accessible materials, CSU created the Center for Accessible Media. The Center operates a database where scanned or copied course materials can be converted into electronic format and stored.

The Center has become a collaborative effort with CSU, UC, and community colleges, allowing e-texts to be shared across campuses. Collaboration in this effort is important because campuses must absorb the costs of converting documents, which is often expensive and time consuming. The effectiveness of the Center has not been fully researched, but it does serve as one example of how campuses provide services to students with disabilities.

Veterans with Disabilities

Large numbers of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are returning from combat and attending college. California leads the nation in the number of veterans living in the state — 2.2 million — and is making efforts to accommodate their needs on college campuses. Some veterans suffer from temporary or permanent disabilities due to brain injury, hearing impairment, post traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, anger management issues, and depression.

While many veterans experience mild traumatic brain injuries which heal in a few months, others require long-term support. The federal Americans with Disabilities Act and state law do not require campuses to provide accommodations to students with “temporary disabling conditions” lasting less than three months. Campuses can decide on a case-by-case basis whether to provide support to students with temporary disabilities, including veterans.

It is important for colleges to learn how to recognize and provide support services to veterans with visible, invisible, and multiple disabilities. Veterans who become disabled for the first time may not be familiar with services for which they may be eligible. They may not know how to ask for services, or may not consider themselves to be disabled. Staff in disabled student services and veterans services need to work together to help veterans identify their disabilities and access proper services.

In order to assure access and equity to disabled veterans, campuses might establish a committee that meets regularly to assess and develop services for returning veterans and active duty personnel, and establish on-campus veterans centers for socializing and networking. Faculty and staff could attend workshops on issues facing veterans. Partnerships could be established between the military branches, California Office of Veterans Affairs, California Department of Education, Disabled Student Services, Department of Rehabilitation, and other agencies to increase access to services.

Funding Options

Funding for higher education is limited, and many campuses are challenged in providing adequate services with no additional funding. Increasing the quality of services and programs may become even more difficult as more veterans return to college, many with a disability requiring assistance.

CSU and UC do not receive designated funding for disabled student services and instead use their existing resources. Community colleges are allocated funding to provide access to services, classes, and programs under Assembly Bill 77, which established Disabled Student Programs & Services offices on every community college campus.

The Commission recognizes that new funding for programs and services is unlikely to be provided in a state budget crisis. It is possible that more funding will be available in the future. In its June report, the advisory committee will focus on recommendations that require little or no additional funding. As the advisory committee identifies priorities that will need additional state funding, it will develop long-term goals to pursue as the state's economy improves.

Commission staff will compile a report on students with disabilities, based on this information and other data gathered over the coming months. A comparable report on LGBT students will also be developed. Both reports are expected to include recommendations for possible policy or administrative options, and both are expected to be presented to the Commission at its June 2009 meeting.

PANEL DISCUSSION

A panel of advocates, students, and service providers will address the Commission on the experience and needs of college students with disabilities. Panelists are representatives of all California higher education systems, but are not speaking for the systems. They are describing only their personal perspectives.

The panelists will share their experiences and views on how these students should be supported so that bias and discrimination do not damage their chances for success. Panelists have been specifically asked to address where more services are needed, and to suggest any legislative or administrative policy ideas that could help identify and meet student needs.

California State University

Paul Miller is the Director of Disabled Student Services at CSU Fullerton, chair-elect of the CSU/DSS Director's Council and the most senior member of the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. He is a member of the Executive Board and Chair of the Education and Employment Subcommittee. He is president of the board of directors of the Riverside County non-profit employment training organization Ability Counts, and chair of the board of directors of the non-profit Friends of Californians with Disabilities.

University of California

Henry "Hoby" Wedler is a third-year student at UC Davis, majoring in chemistry, math, and history. He is a totally blind student who has found ways to overcome obstacles and succeed in personal and educational endeavors. In high school, he rowed for a crew team, tutored students in math and science, and volunteered with Interact, a junior Rotary Club. He will provide insight on what it is like to be a blind student attending a public university.

Community Colleges

Scott Hamilton is the president of the California Association for Postsecondary Education and Disabilities, a statewide professional organization for faculty and staff working with students with disabilities. He is the coordinator for the disability support office and a counselor and learning disability specialist at Cosumnes River College in the Los Rios Community College District.

Independent Institutions

Danny Nuss is the director of Disabled Services at the University of the Pacific since 2005, where he is also pursuing a master's degree in communication. He worked in disability services at San Joaquin Delta College, and worked as an independent contractor for the California Department of Rehabilitation. He became disabled in a work-related accident in 1999, so he can provide both a provider and a student perspective.